

NATIONAL STRATEGIES FOR REDUCING THE EDUCATION GAP IN FOSTER YOUTH

by
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requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Public Management

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ABSTRACT

Within the United States, at any given time, there are approximately 600,000 children in the foster care system. Based on standardized test scores and graduation rates, there is a significant education gap between foster children and their peers. The education gap that exists has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and limits the likelihood of positive outcomes at adulthood for the foster population. This capstone presents a potential strategy for reform of the foster care system within the United States, specifically with regards to education of the children. This proposal augments existing solutions and create a compounding effect with current legislation and strategies. This policy proposal will specifically address the following problem: How can the education gap that exists for the foster child population be reduced? This proposal recommends a two-part solution, the first part focused on staffing to child welfare agencies, the second with regards to applicability of foster student transportation funding. This proposal recommends creating an “Education Growth Coordinator” role within child welfare agencies, as well as hiring professional educators in the welfare agencies to serve as tutors for foster children. The second facet of this proposal involves modifying legislation so that funding for transportation and school stability can be utilized for resourcing virtual schooling in the event of school shutdowns, as seen in the COVID-19 pandemic. This proposal lays out the action forcing event, relevant policy history, outlines the proposal, policy and political analysis, and finally presents recommendations. In summary, the recommendation is to implement the policy proposal in full to have the greatest impact in reducing the education gap.

Capstone Advisor: Dr. Paul J. Weinstein, Jr.

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A very special acknowledgement to all the foster care social workers out there. You are an amazing group of super humans and don't get told THANK YOU nearly enough for caring for society's most vulnerable. Thank you.

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MEMORANDUM

TO: Elizabeth Darling (Commissioner, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, HHS)
FROM: Brian C. Meese
DATE: May 7, 2021
SUBJECT: NATIONAL STRATEGIES FOR REDUCING THE EDUCATION GAP IN FOSTER YOUTH

Action Forcing Event

On December 30, 2020, NBC News reported a national foster care crisis exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ Across the nation, there has been an increase in children admitted to foster care, increased rates of those contracting the virus, and additional learning loss due to socio-economic factors. In the Chicago metropolis, area children needing foster care rose 33%, putting stress on group homes and foster families. In part because of the risk of contracting the disease, there has been a decrease in available foster families.² The challenges of virtual learning have been magnified in the foster care population due to the limited access to technology, coupled with instability at home.³

¹ Char Adams, "Foster Care Crisis: More Kids Are Entering, but Fewer Families Are Willing to Take Them In," January 3, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/foster-care-crisis-more-kids-are-entering-fewer-families-are-n1252450>.

² Jim Williams, "Foster Parents Needed As COVID-19 Pandemic Strains Families," December 25, 2020, <https://chicago.cbslocal.com/2020/12/25/covid-19-foster-parents-needed-pandemic/>.

³ Ashley Riegle, Ashan Singh, and Allie Yang, "For Foster Kids, COVID-19 Poses a Second Obstacle to Stability and Success," November 23, 2020, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/foster-kids-covid-19-poses-obstacle-stability-success/story?id=74366515>.

Problem Statement

The impact of COVID-19 has had a magnified impact on the children within the foster care systems throughout the United States. In addition to already being part of a vulnerable population, disproportionately skewed toward minorities, the children now must contend with a myriad of issues, including housing instability, food insecurity, and adapting to virtual learning.⁴ The epidemic and the impact it has had allowed a spotlight to shine on inequalities in both the health care system and the social welfare state. The CDC has identified inequalities in healthcare access, occupation, education, housing, and discrimination, as factors contributing to minority groups having a greater risk of contracting and being impacted by the disease.⁵ While the impact of COVID-19 hits across multiple aspects of the foster children's development, the effect on education, both immediate and lagging, poses significant risk and carries generational implications. This policy proposal will specifically address the following problem: How can the education gap that exists for the foster child population be lessened?

COVID-19 has stalled and altered many of the foster system's critical aspects, including court proceedings, visitations, and access to care. The convergence of the two factors can be further aggravated by tertiary factors such as immigration status or

⁴ Child Welfare League of America, "Child Welfare League of America," Child Welfare League of America, December 2020, <https://www.cwla.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Transition-2021-Final.pdf>.

⁵ National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases, "Health Equity Considerations and Racial and Ethnic Minority Groups," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, February 12, 2021), <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/health-equity/race-ethnicity.html>.

geography (rural vs. urban).⁶ Unfortunately, the foster care system was already in crisis and stretched thin before the pandemic, leaving little margin for the pandemic. Each year, approximately 600,000 children will go through the foster system.⁷ Major cities have already seen spikes in children admitted to the foster care system. Furthermore, many leaders fear that there is still under-reporting of abuse and homelessness due to virtual schooling.^{8,9}

To fully understand this problem's immediacy, given the current conditions, it is critical to understand the magnitude of the learning gap between the children in the foster system and their peers before the pandemic. According to a 2014 study, the average reading level of a 17–18-year-old in foster care was the 7th-grade level. Additionally, foster youth are approximately 2.5x – 3.5x more likely to require special education assistance in schools.¹⁰ The deficit that the average foster youth experiences will only worsen without access to the tailored educational specialists provided with in-

⁶ Ashley Riegle, Ashan Singh, and Allie Yang, "For Foster Kids, COVID-19 Poses a Second Obstacle to Stability and Success," November 23, 2020, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/foster-kids-covid-19-poses-obstacle-stability-success/story?id=74366515>.

⁷ Child Welfare League of America, "Child Welfare League of America," Child Welfare League of America, December 2020, <https://www.cwla.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Transition-2021-Final.pdf>.

⁸ Jim Williams, "Foster Parents Needed As COVID-19 Pandemic Strains Families," December 25, 2020, <https://chicago.cbslocal.com/2020/12/25/covid-19-foster-parents-needed-pandemic/>.

⁹ Greg Childress, "Student Homelessness: An Epidemic in NC That Predates COVID-19," NC Policy Watch, September 18, 2020, <http://www.ncpolicywatch.com/2020/09/18/student-homelessness-an-epidemic-in-nc-that-predates-covid-19/>.

¹⁰ Working Group on Foster Care and Education, "Fostering Success in Education: National Factsheet on the Educational Outcomes of Children in Foster Care," accessed 2021, https://www.fostercareandeducation.org/DesktopModules/Bring2mind/DMX/Download.aspx?EntryId=1937&Command=Core_Download&method=inline&PortalId=0&TabId=124.

person education. Even compared to other low-income populations, the high school dropout rate for foster youth was approximately 3x higher, pre-pandemic.¹¹

Understanding the full scope of the problem and the multi-faceted policy solution required to solve it will take a thorough understanding of the compounding impacts of existing learning gaps, homelessness, technology, and the various roles & actors within the welfare state. These topics will be covered in greater depth further in the policy proposal; however, the state of education pre-pandemic was critical to preview now to highlight the problem's urgency.

Across the country, there is an education gap, as evaluated by standardized test scores in math and reading, as well as graduation rates. As shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2, students in every state are significantly less likely than their peers to graduate high school, as well as lag in every significant measurable outcome.^{12 13}

¹¹ First Star Institute, "Foster Youth Success in College Project: Initial Report" (Washington, D.C.: First Star Institute, 2018).

¹² Kate Stringer, "ESSA Says State Report Cards Must Track How Many Students in Foster Care Are Passing Their Reading & Math Tests and Graduating High School. Only 16 Do," ESSA Says State Report Cards Must Track How Many Students in Foster Care Are Passing Their Reading & Math Tests and Graduating High School. Only 16 Do, February 20, 2019, <https://www.the74million.org/article/essa-says-state-report-cards-must-track-how-many-students-in-foster-care-are-passing-their-reading-math-tests-and-graduating-high-school-only-16-do/>.

¹³ Alexander Montero, "Quick Guide: Students in Foster Care," EdSource (EdSource, April 29, 2020), <https://edsource.org/2019/students-in-foster-care-a-quick-guide/621586>.

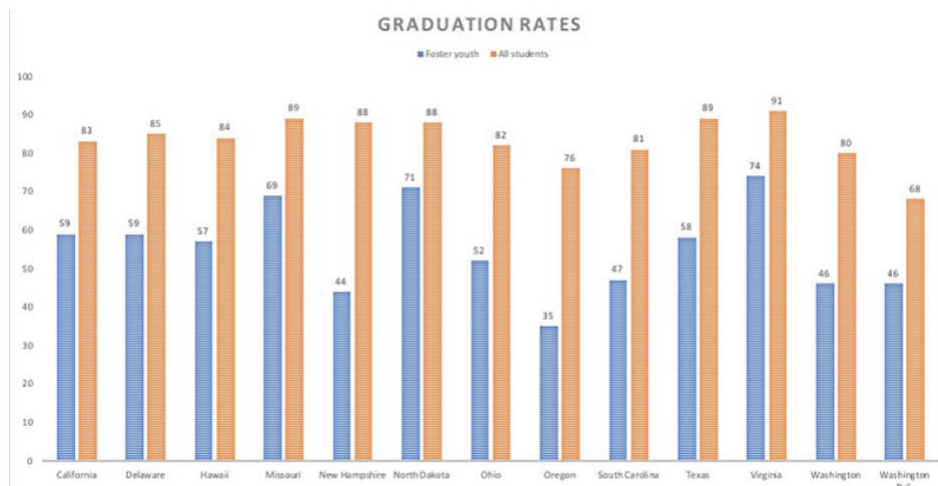


Figure 1: Graduation Rates for Foster Youth

Outcomes for foster youth vs all students

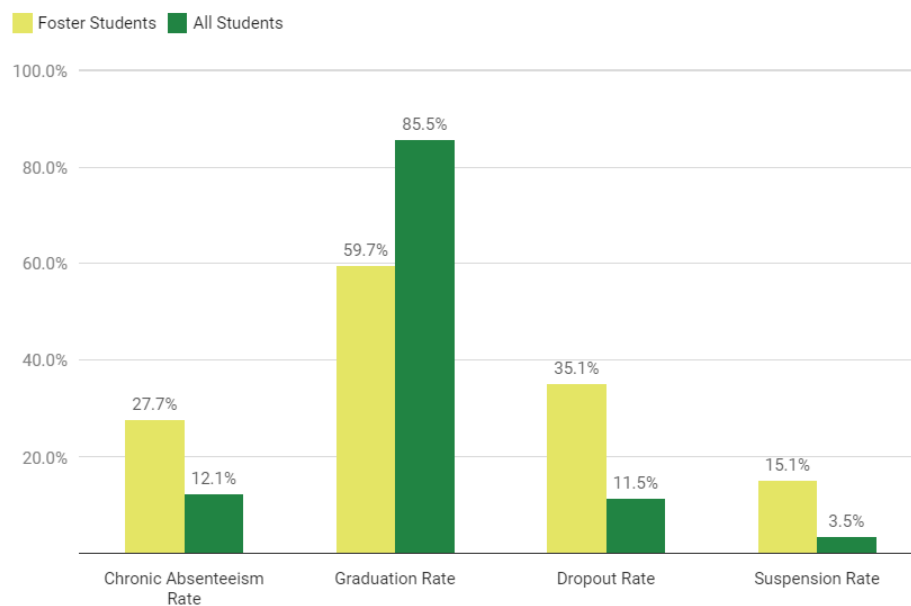


Figure 2: Foster Youth Outcomes

The generational impact and magnitude of the problem are put further into perspective when evaluated against the accession into the adult population each year. Although the average age of youth in foster care is 6.5 years old, approximately 20,000

youths will age out of the foster care system each year.¹⁴ For the “aging out” population, 70% will require some form of government assistance within the first four years of exiting the system, and 25% will not even finish high school.¹⁵ With the global pandemic magnifying the impact of an existing learning gap, a policy must be enacted now to curb an irreversible generational loss in productivity and welfare drain as the foster children of today mature to adults.

Despite the nearly \$30B spent on the child welfare system, the investment in the foster system children still pales compared to their peers, likely contributing to the gap existing prepandemic. On average, the system invests less than 50% into foster children, compared to the average American family.¹⁶ A holistic approach to both policy and funding will be required to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on the learning gaps in foster care.

¹⁴ iFoster, “6 Quick Statistics on the Current State of Foster Care,” iFoster, 2020, <https://www.ifoster.org/6-quick-statistics-on-the-current-state-of-foster-care/>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ iFoster, “6 Quick Statistics on the Current State of Foster Care,” iFoster, 2020, <https://www.ifoster.org/6-quick-statistics-on-the-current-state-of-foster-care/>.

History & Background

A thorough understanding of the historical background behind education policy related to foster care is critical to comprehend the education gap for foster children and potential policy solutions. Over time, policies to reduce the foster care education gap, as evidenced by graduation rates and standardized test scores, have been grouped broadly with other education policy efforts in America. Policy has evolved from focusing on the broad population with all other students, to low-income students, to finally toward having distinct, foster-focused policies. With the evolution of policies, data and tracking of foster student performance longitudinally has only emerged in recent years.

The history of education for foster children is complex and involves policies at the federal, state, and local levels. The reason for the complexity of policy solutions dates to the passing of the 10th Amendment and the Bill of Rights. Because education is not explicitly covered in the U.S. Constitution, nor is it prohibited to the states, it is delegated to the states and the people. As such, foster care education policy and implementation is a combination of federal, state, and local policy. For this historical review, I will focus on the background and history at the federal level.

There has been various legislation over the past two hundred years addressing education within the social welfare system; however, there are significant milestones in the modern era that laid the groundwork for policy today. In 1987 the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act was passed into law which allowed for the provision of immediate enrollment of homeless children and youth into schools, regardless of

records.¹⁷ In this act, funds were allocated to establish a coordination office for education efforts at the state level, to ensure that homeless children had the same education opportunities as non-homeless children. Furthermore, by providing for a coordination office, the government was better able to see additional impediments to the youth's educational success.¹⁸ While foster children are, by definition, not homeless, the act did include foster children awaiting placement (later removed in 2016). Many foster youth face homelessness throughout the course of their educational careers and the work that the McKinney-Vento law provided is significant in aiding their stability.

In 1990, based on data and insights from the creation of the state coordination offices, the McKinney-Vento Act was amended to address the education gaps further. The changes in 1990 challenged the states to look past the issue of homelessness and make concerted efforts to eliminate all barriers to educational performance. This change in mindset expanded the problem from being a particular issue of barriers to enrollment to a broader discussion of hindrances to academic success. The initial McKinney-Vento Act did not allow for funds to provide direct educational assistance – the changes made in 1990 allowed for the provision of funds to go through local education agencies and pay for direct educational services.¹⁹

¹⁷ Federal Education for Homeless and Youth Programs, "PDF" (Washington, DC, October 2018).

¹⁸ "History of the McKinney Act," William and Mary School of Education, accessed February 28, 2021, <https://education.wm.edu/centers/hope/specialtopics/mckinneyact/index.php>.

¹⁹ Ibid.

In 1994, the educational reforms took another step forward with the Improving America's Schools Act. This bill strengthened the language used to discuss coordination between the various government and interagency departments therein. While the bill's focus was on higher student standards, higher teaching standards, accountability, and community partnerships, specific provisions helped the foster care population. As part of promoting partnerships, the language acknowledges explicitly how factors outside of school can impact behavior. Therefore, provisions can be made to integrate social welfare and health programs, specifically in low-income areas.²⁰ Also significant is the inclusion of support for preschool education.²¹ To date, research continues to support the benefits of strong educational starts and earlier intervention in low-income student success.²² The acknowledgments and connections explicitly pronounced in this bill are significant in laying the groundwork for future policy impacting foster children. This bill illuminates the trend that is developing around acknowledging that many factors compound on each other to impact the educational achievement of foster youth.

The following significant policy change for foster youth was the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), passing in 2002. This act significantly impacted education standards

²⁰ Richard W. Riley, "The Improving America's Schools Act of 1994," Archived: The Improving America's Schools Act of 1994, accessed February 28, 2021, <https://www2.ed.gov/offices/OESE/archives/legislation/ESEA/brochure/iasa-bro.html>.

²¹ Federal Education for Homeless and Youth Programs. "Federal Education for Homeless and Youth Programs Profile." Washington, DC: US Department of Education, October 2018.

²² National Working Group on Foster Care and Education. "Fostering Success in Education: National Factsheet on Education Outcomes of Children in Foster Care." National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, April 2018.

throughout the country but notably reauthorized portions of the McKinney-Vento Act and strengthened requirements on school districts to have liaisons²³ In addition to those changes, the act allowed for an increased focus on literacy and specifically gave priority to foster children for the “Reading is Fundamental” book distribution program.²⁴ To this point, the specific prioritization in the reading program is the most significant deviation from a focus on school stability as a means of improving foster child academic performance. There existed criticism of the No Child Left Behind Act for various reasons; however, a common theme was overexertion of federal authority in education, a trend that will be reversed in future legislations.²⁵

2008 can broadly be characterized as an inflection point in the federal approach to foster care reform. The laws passed in that year and the decade that follows constituted a more granular focus on the gaps that foster children face and the role the federal government can play in closing the gaps. The 2008 Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act included legislation that specifically targeted child welfare and improved long-term outcomes for youth in the system. In the law, school stability was specifically prioritized as well as assistance with transportation as necessary. In addition to the provisions about education, the law extends the age of

²³ Federal Education for Homeless and Youth Programs. “Federal Education for Homeless and Youth Programs Profile.” Washington, DC: US Department of Education, October 2018.

²⁴ Office of the Under Secretary of Education. “No Child Left Behind, A Desktop Reference” Washington, DC: US Department of Education, 2002.

²⁵ Jeremy Loudonback, John Kelly, and Serita Cox, “Potential Wins for Foster Youth in No Child Left Behind Rewrite,” The Imprint, November 9, 2015, <https://imprintnews.org/research-news/potential-wins-for-foster-youth-in-no-child-left-behind-rewrite/10866>.

federal support for older youth to 21 and opens assistance to foster children in Native American tribes.²⁶

Despite efforts made in the NCLB and the Foster Connections reform, students continue to lag. As shown in the performance results in Figure 3 for students in Colorado from 2008-2014, the policy changes had minimal effect in levels of reading or math proficiency.²⁷

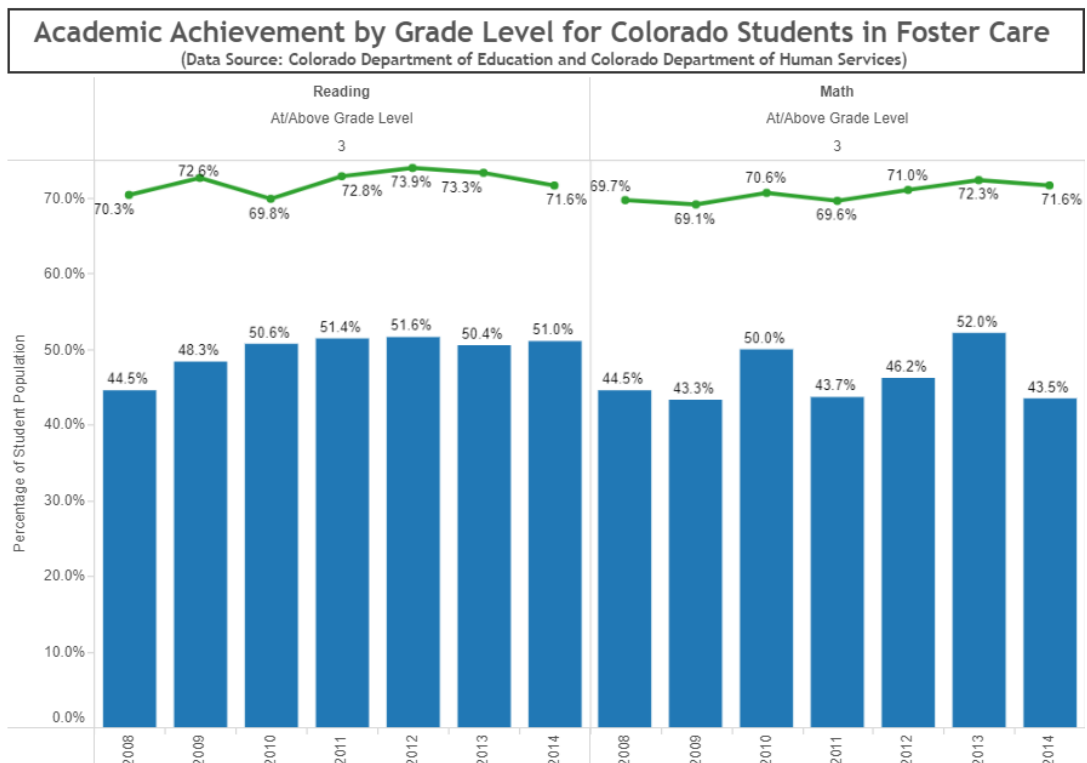


Figure 3: Academic Achievement by Grade Level for Colorado Students in Foster Care

²⁶ Children’s Defense Fund and the Center for Law and Social Policy, and Grandfamilies National Partnership Working Group. “Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoption Act Will Improve Outcomes for Children and Youth in Foster Care.” Grandfamilies National Partnership Working Group, 2008.

²⁷ “Academic Achievement: Needs Assessment Data: Foster Care Research,” The Colorado Study of Students in Foster Care, accessed April 26, 2021, <https://www.unco.edu/cebs/foster-care-research/needs-assessment-data/academic-achievement/>.

In 2013, the Uninterrupted Scholars Act further solidified the federal government's role in heavily encouraging interagency communication and children's advocacy. The bill amends the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) to release a student's education records, without parental consent, to a social worker or other state representatives.²⁸ This act represents two significant points concerning foster care education policy. The first is that lawmakers at the federal level are working to ensure that children's education barriers and successful outcomes are not impeded. The second point of significance is the change to legislation that is not explicitly earmarked for foster care to align it with long-term outcomes better. By normalizing the child welfare population's inclusion in reform bills, legislation can inherently help keep closing the achievement gap.

The next significant evolution in education standards impacting foster children came through the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015. The ESSA is a reauthorization of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and an overhaul of the 2002 NCLB Act. Research continued to show that the performance factors were linked to a lack of stability in school and the movement of students

²⁸ Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, "Guidance on the Amendments to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act by the Uninterrupted Scholars Act," *Guidance on the Amendments to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act by the Uninterrupted Scholars Act* (Washington, DC: US Department of Education, 2014).

between placements.²⁹ Figure 4 illustrates the leading research at the time that prompted policymakers to focus decisions on school stability throughout transitions.³⁰

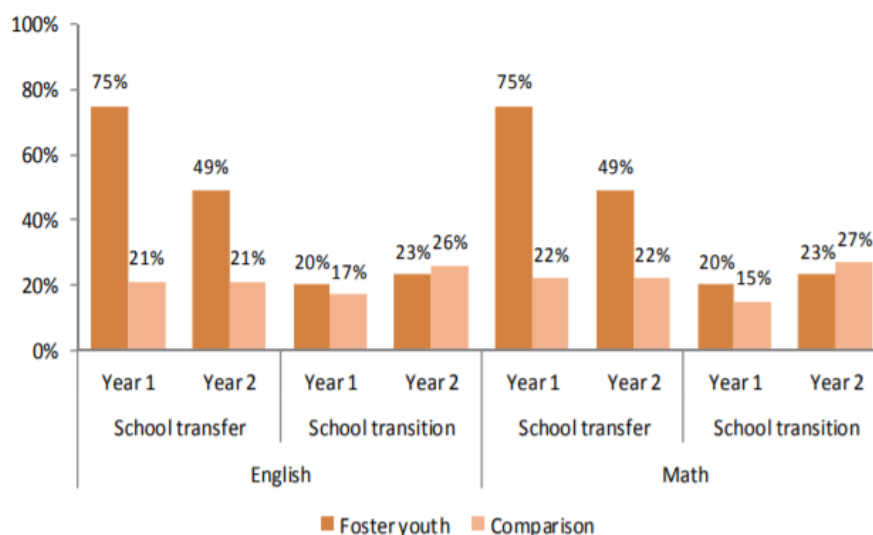


Figure 4: Foster Youth and Comparison Sample, English and Math, Percent of School Transfer and Transitions in Year 1 and Year 2

The ESSA further solidifies the government’s position that a leading factor contributing to the education gap with foster children is their lack of educational stability. Through the act, foster children are authorized to remain in the same school, even if their placement changes. The act puts the onus on the schools, state, and local governments to provide for enrollment if a change is needed, transportation to and from the school, and transfer of records (enabled by the earlier mentioned

²⁹ Kristine Frerer, “Foster Youth Stability,” Institute for Evidenced Based Change (Center for Social Services Research , 2013), http://www.iebcnow.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/pub_foster_youth_stability_2013.pdf.

³⁰ “Students in Foster Care,” Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, accessed March 12, 2021, <https://oese.ed.gov/offices/office-of-formula-grants/school-support-and-accountability/students-foster-care/>.

Uninterrupted Scholars Act).³¹ Finally, ESSA is notable because it includes provisions to hold the schools and both state and local education agencies accountable for tracking foster children's progress. ESSA carries no additional funding source; however, it authorizes Title I funds to be used to meet the requirements. This increase in data will allow the tiers of government and school districts to serve best and identify the gaps.

While the ESSA passage allowed for greater school stability with a coordinator's mandate and more throughout data collection and tracking of foster student success, it did create changes that handicap current funding streams. The ESSA changed the definition of "homeless youth" in the McKinney-Vento Act to no longer include "foster youth awaiting placement." The change to the McKinney-Vento definition now excludes a funding stream that could have been used to help pay for transportation and other local education resources.³²

Following the Coronavirus pandemic outbreak, special provisions were made in the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act) to address Foster children. In the CARES Act, as part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Relief Fund, provisions were made to purchase hardware/software. The act states that relief funds can be used on behalf of students served by the local educational agencies.³³

³¹ Jessica Lahey, "What the New Federal Education Law Says About Foster Kids," The Atlantic (Atlantic Media Company, December 17, 2015), <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/12/esea-foster-kids/420894/>.

³² Jeremy Loudonback, John Kelly, and Serita Cox, "Potential Wins for Foster Youth in No Child Left Behind Rewrite," The Imprint, November 9, 2015, <https://imprintnews.org/research-news/potential-wins-for-foster-youth-in-no-child-left-behind-rewrite/10866>.

³³ 117th Congress of the United States, H.R. 748, "Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act," Washington D.C., 2021.

Further support for foster youths was made in the 2021 Consolidated Appropriations Act. Most provisions made in Section X, “Supporting Foster Youth and Families During the Pandemic,” focused on transportation, losing funding requirements, access/acquisition of technology for home visits, and extending care to prevent aging out. Specifically, with regards to education, the CARES Act Section X did not explicitly discuss educational resources for children in foster care beyond increasing the allocation of funds for transportation.³⁴ The increase in transportation funding from the CARES Act seems superfluous given the pandemic’s immediate impact was schooling being shut down.

Based on an analysis of the historical policies, three prominent trends are evident in the policy approaches to the education gap. The first is that there is a federal acknowledgment that the gap exists and needs to be addressed. Federal directives have earmarked funding to state and local government to address the problem and directed for the creation of coordinators at the local level. The second trend is that most policies specifically address school stability as a primary driver of the achievement gap. While school stability is a significant issue to academic achievement, it is not alone. Finally, recent legislation focused on increased funding to existing programs and funding for technology resources tied to home visits, not specifically the challenges of foster children and access to technology in their placements.

³⁴ 117th Congress of the United States, H.R. 133, “Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021” Washington D.C., 2021.

Policy Proposal

Policy Goal

As illustrated through the action-forcing event, problem statement, and background & history, thus far, there is a significant gap in the educational attainment of foster children in the United States. This policy proposal's immediate goal (3-5 years) is to reduce the education gap that exists for foster children, measured by state standardized testing in reading and math, as well as high school graduation rates. The long-term goal (10+ years) is to ultimately cause a benefit to society by increasing the education level and ability of one of the most at-risk population, allowing them to earn more and contribute in a more meaningful way to their community. Existing foster care focused education reforms emphasized school stability during placement. There have been strides made in this aspect of their education; however, this policy proposal will not address school placement directly. This policy proposal contains two significant facets. The first part is the addition of an education growth coordinator and education specialists or tutors as part of the local child welfare team. The second part is increased access to education technology granted directly to the school-age foster child, managed by the local welfare agency.

Policy Implementation Tool & Design Specifics

The primary means of implementing this policy proposal will be to subsidize state and community programs through existing programs and grants. The use of grants

to fund foster care programs is typical in federal legislation concerning foster care and foster youth education.

Funding for this policy proposal will come through a combination of both Title 1 Part A education funding and Title IV Part A social services funding. If further funding is estimated to be required, a Social Services Block Grant could be authorized with a new funding stream that states could apply for, with the total size available based on the school-age population currently in foster care. Education funding comes through Title I Part A federal education funding, focuses on low-income student success.³⁵ In the Social Services Administration, Title IV, Part A, covers the funding for student support and academic enrichment³⁶. Funding for increased technology made available to foster children would be available through the Social Security Act's funding. This funding allows for the provisioning of virtual home visits and the use of funds to administer those. Furthermore, H.R. 133 authorizes increased monies granted during the COVID-19 pandemic to go toward transportation funding and school stability efforts.³⁷ Access to technology to attend schooling virtually should be characterized as a school stability effort.

³⁵ "Title I, Part A Program," Title I, Part A Program (US Department of Education (ED), November 7, 2018), <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/titleiparta/index.html#:~:text=Schools%20in%20which%20children%20from,of%20the%20lowest%20achieving%20students>.

³⁶ "Subgranting FY 2017 Title IV-A Funds to LEAs: Questions and Answers," Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, (US Department of Education, June 30, 2017), https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/sites/default/files/Subgranting_FY_2017_Title_IV_A_LEAs_QA.pdf.

³⁷ 117th Congress of the United States, H.R. 133, "Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021" Washington D.C., 2021.

This policy proposal's targeted population is school-age (K-12) foster youth within the foster care system. While various programs specifically target economically depressed populations, this specific proposal is centered on only foster youth legally in the government's care.

The policy proposal's first facet focuses on the child welfare team's staffing and ensuring that the appropriate amount of education professionals are involved in the children's lives and have the increased focus required to close the education gap. To this end, we propose an education growth coordinator be established at the state and local welfare agencies to monitor the overall progress and track students as they move potentially between schools and districts. The cost of the position would be comparable to the current education stability coordinator. This role is modeled off the education stability coordinator position created in the ESSA; however, it would carry an expanded mandate to monitor performance, track foster youth individual education programs (IEPs), and coordinate education resources and additional tutoring.

Ideally, the education growth coordinator's creation would coincide with the assignment of tutors to the local welfare agencies to work with foster youth and report back to the coordinator on progress. There has been legislation introduced for an increase in AmeriCorps' size to help respond to COVID-19 national service. AmeriCorps tutors, based on a Teach for America type model, could close the education gap that will exist as we exit the COVID-19 era.³⁸ As stated above, foster youth will be at an even

³⁸ Senator Markey Press Team, "Senators Markey and Van Hollen Introduce Legislation to Significantly Expand National Service, Fully Utilize Peace Corps in Response to Coronavirus Crisis: U.S. Senator Ed Markey of Massachusetts," SENATOR ED MARKEY, April 13, 2020,

more significant disadvantage given the multiple conditions impacting them; therefore, targeted educational support under this proposal should be assigned to the local welfare agencies, not the school districts. By assigning the supplemental tutors to social services under an education growth coordinator, the government ensures the student's education continues, regardless of the involvement of the foster placement. If school is not in session, open for in-person instruction, or school stability is not possible because of a necessary placement change, the youths continue to have a resource dedicated to their success. A similar model to this exists for low-income students in the United Kingdom. The National Tutoring Program will cost the U.K. government approximately \$435 million and last for two years.³⁹

The second facet of this policy proposal is centered on access to technology for foster care youth. We propose that current H.R.133 legislation be modified to allow funding for foster youth transportation to/from school to be used to procure school education devices (tablets, laptops, hotspots, etc.) for the individual foster youths, managed by child welfare agency – ideally the newly created, education growth coordinator. With the instability faced by foster youth and the disparity between school district's technology readiness going into the pandemic, the risk is too high for an already disadvantaged child to not have access to learn. The funds that are earmarked

<https://www.markey.senate.gov/news/press-releases/senators-markey-and-van-hollen-introduce-legislation-to-significantly-expand-national-service-fully-utilize-peace-corps-in-response-to-coronavirus-crisis>.

³⁹ Amanda Aisen, "Commentary: American Students Need Help through the Pandemic, and the U.K.'s Tutoring Program Could Be a Model," *Fortune* (Fortune, January 13, 2021), <https://fortune.com/2021/01/13/covid-students-impact-tutoring-education/>.

for school stability, utilized in this fashion, will provide stability for schooling, regardless of the home environment.

The authorization for this policy will come through the U.S. Congress, but the day-to-day implementation of the policy will fall to the state and local governments. The successful implementation of this policy will rely on state and local welfare agencies and school administrations to work together seamlessly. Implementation will look different in every state and potentially interact with other initiatives rebuilding after the pandemic. The ideal timeline for implementation for passage of this legislation is the next three months so that educators can adequately prepare for the start of classes in Fall 2021.

Policy Authorizing Tool

The policy authorizing tool that forms the legal justification for this policy to achieve its desired outcomes is legislation. While this office does not formally create legislation (CYS Admin/HHS), it has a significant role in drafting the proposed legislation by providing a voice for the child and social services organizations throughout the country. The authority for Congress to pass legislation comes directly from the U.S. Constitution. Education policy, especially as it pertains to foster children, traditionally has come through legislation. The policy's authorization would modify the language and specified interpretation of existing legislation and could exist as its standalone bill or straphangers on larger legislative packages. The specific policies proposed fit as portions

of the next reauthorization of the Every Student Succeeds Act or components in a forthcoming COVID-19 recovery-focused legislation.

In recent years, executive orders have been used as the policy authorizing tools to rapidly address concerns in the child welfare system, not currently addressed by legislation. President Trump in 2020 issued an order that specifically increased oversight and data collection, collaboration with outside agencies, and reduced barriers to support for older youth in the system.⁴⁰ While this mechanism is efficient, particularly in Congress' divisive environment, it is not appropriate for this policy proposal. Because this policy intends to create and modify existing legislation, the authorization tool must be further legislation.

⁴⁰ Michael Fitzgerald et al., "What's Actually in The Trump Executive Order on Child Welfare," The Imprint, August 1, 2020, <https://imprintnews.org/analysis/what-actually-in-trump-executive-order-child-welfare/44792>.

Policy Analysis

This section will analyze the proposed policies to inform the policy decision-makers with a complete picture of the policy impact and potential ramifications – both positive and negative. To reiterate, the overall proposal’s goal is to reduce the education gap for foster children, which will ultimately cause a more significant benefit to society in the near and long term. Primary measures of effectiveness for the policy will be high school graduation rates and state standardized test scores in math and literacy. The total timeframe for evaluation is five years, with reviews happening annually and drafted reauthorization/expansion beginning in the fourth year. The following policy analysis begins with a high-level assessment of the policy. It then provides a thorough, honest-broker assessment of the two-part proposal through six evaluative criteria: efficiency, effectiveness, equity, social acceptability, administrative feasibility, and technical feasibility. Political feasibility is an additional evaluative criterion and will be addressed in the follow-on political analysis.

In general, there is a reasonable likelihood that the policy will achieve its goals of *reducing* the education gap that exists for foster children. The proposal’s design compounds on the work already in motion working to solve this problem and adds additional resources to the solution. In the short term, studies have consistently shown that increased attention paid to students via interventions and reduced class sizes lead to higher graduation rates and performance.⁴¹ Additionally, current research shows that

⁴¹ Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach et al., “Fourteen Economic Facts on Education and Economic Opportunity,” Brookings (Brookings, August 30, 2016),

teacher social support can be effective in improving grades and performance. Using this as a model, we can infer that the increased and focused support by a tutor will improve achievement.⁴² Current programs in California have shown some success in moving children from not meeting the standard to meeting the standard.

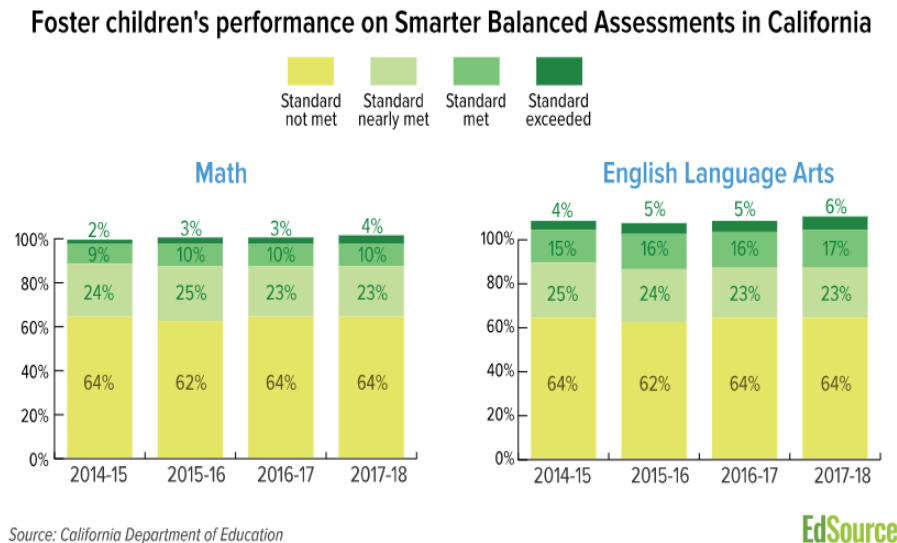


Figure 5: Foster children's performance on Smarter Balanced Assessments in California

There is a strong likelihood that this proposal, compounding with existing programs will generate the positive results that are desired, as illustrated in Figure 5.⁴³ Furthermore, when evaluating the overall likelihood that this policy will achieve its long-term goals, the historical evidence also presents a strong trend. Evidence continually shows a positive correlation between economic productivity and the educational

<https://www.brookings.edu/research/fourteen-economic-facts-on-education-and-economic-opportunity-2/>.

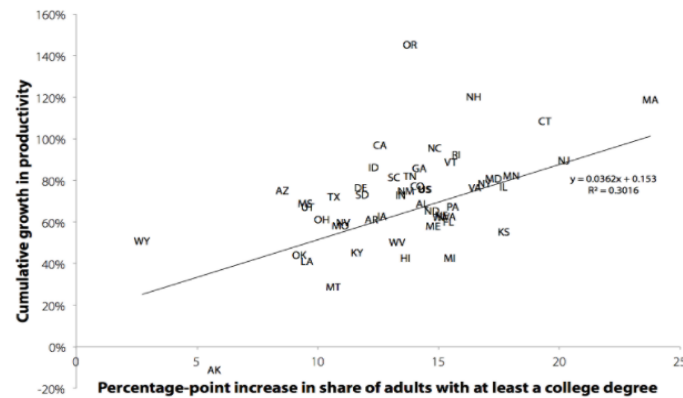
⁴² Austen McGuire et al., "Academic Functioning of Youth in Foster Care: The Influence of Unique Sources of Social Support," Children and Youth Services Review (Pergamon, December 25, 2020), <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0190740920322891>.

⁴³ Alexander Montero, "Quick Guide: Students in Foster Care," EdSource (EdSource, April 29, 2020), <https://edsources.org/2019/students-in-foster-care-a-quick-guide/621586>.

attainment of the population, as seen in Figure 6. Therefore, by raising the achievement of the foster population, the overall productivity will see gains as they reach working age.⁴⁴

Productivity has grown more in states with greater growth in the educational attainment of their workforce

Relationship between state productivity growth and increase in college attainment from 1979 to 2012



Source: EPI analysis of unpublished total economy productivity data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) Labor Productivity and Costs program, state employment data from BLS Local Area Unemployment Statistics, and college attainment data from the Current Population Survey basic monthly microdata

Figure 6: Relationship with productivity and educational attainment

The likelihood that the proposed policy will not achieve its goals exists, and there are two aspects of the problem that contribute ultimately to a negative outcome. The first contributing factor to overall policy failure is the breadth of the problem. With approximately 600,000 children in foster care at any given time, even with high ratios of growth coordinators and tutors per child, that is still a considerable quantity of children to support. To determine the feasibility of the proposal, the scope may need to be drastically reduced. Secondly, the proposal's likely failure point is due to the national

⁴⁴ Noah Berger and Peter Fisher • August 22, "A Well-Educated Workforce Is Key to State Prosperity," Economic Policy Institute, accessed March 31, 2021, <https://www.epi.org/publication/states-education-productivity-growth-foundations/>.

structure of welfare systems throughout the country, which could lead to inconsistencies with implementation. As stated in previous sections, the foster system is a confluence of federal, state, and local government agencies.

Efficiency

This policy's efficiency is evident when evaluating the current utilization of funding for student transportation, given the COVID-19 pandemic and schools' closure. The policy provides for language in future legislation to enable these funds to pay for foster students' technology resources. The new resources that foster children receive instead of transportation between their placement and their school make the funds more efficient for their ultimate purpose of providing a stable learning environment. Given the real possibility that many students could potentially experience a hybrid learning environment going forward, the broadening of transportation cost utilization is an efficient use of funds.⁴⁵

While the efficiencies of using transportation funding for technology resources and remote schooling are impressive, the policy carries several inefficient characteristics. With the creation of the education growth coordinator within social services, the federal government creates an unfunded mandate while moving the onus for student performance from the education agencies to the welfare agencies. This is an inefficient use of resources because there is already a mandate for a school stability and

⁴⁵ Peter DeWitt, "Will the Hybrid School Concept Continue After COVID-19? (Opinion)," Education Week (Education Week, March 3, 2021), <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/opinion-will-the-hybrid-school-concept-continue-after-covid/2021/03>.

transportation coordinator. While the proposal intends to have many educators involved in the welfare agencies and closer to the children, a more cost-efficient mechanism could be reskilling or rescoping the transportation coordinator role. Unfunded mandates are regrettably common in the education setting, and although grants exist, they often do not cover the cost of entire initiatives.⁴⁶

Evaluating efficiency also becomes difficult because funding streams remain available due to COVID-19 pandemic conditions; however, as the time horizon extends, a shortfall may occur when COVID will no longer directly impact school stability. Congress has crafted language to explicitly require the holding of funds in reserve to address learning loss, but it is difficult to determine the longevity of the reserves.⁴⁷ There are currently fiscally efficient aspects of the proposal; however, their efficiency has a likely expiration term before the proposal's goals are realized.

Effectiveness

The proposal's effectiveness and the likeliness of a positive return are bolstered by the nature of the policy and the broader problem. This policy proposal exists as an additional tool in the fight to reduce the education gap for foster children. If fully implemented, the effects of having increased technology resources, a focused growth coordinator, and a tutor, all tied to the foster child and provided via the welfare agency,

⁴⁶ Author Helfried, "State and Federal Mandates Affect Local Education Budget," ConVal School Board, February 17, 2020, <https://schoolboard.convalsd.net/2020/02/13/state-and-federal-mandates-affect-local-education->.

⁴⁷ Jocelyn Salguero/Bakara Johnson, "Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund Tracker," Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund Tracker, accessed April 26, 2021, <https://www.ncsl.org/ncsl-in-dc/standing-committees/education/cares-act-elementary-and-secondary-school-emergency-relief-fund-tracker.aspx>.

will compound on efforts being made by schools and in homes. A working paper by the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) found that tutoring can be a key policy model in impacting the future success of populations, such as foster children, that are significantly behind due to extraneous factors.⁴⁸ NBER found the effects strengthened in earlier grades and when provided by teachers or paraprofessionals, like those recommended in this proposal. By providing additional resources to the welfare agency and then to the child, there is resiliency and consistency in the educational tracking, not just the educational provider (the school district). Ideally, there will be a multiplier effect of the various resources compounding on one another, leading to more remarkable child outcomes. Foster children, especially as they get older, are more likely to move between homes than younger students. The movement between homes provides unstable schooling and educational support networks.⁴⁹ While education stability is one of the facets of ESSA, it is not always possible. Providing the education resource at the welfare agency allows them to stay with the child despite placement changes.

Some factors potentially hamper the policy proposal's effectiveness. Chief among the potential hindrances is the inconsistency with foster care systems throughout the nation. The relationship between local welfare agencies and local

⁴⁸ Andre Nickow, Philip Oreopoulos, and Vincent Quan, "The Impressive Effects of Tutoring on PreK-12 Learning: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of the Experimental Evidence," NBER, July 6, 2020, <https://www.nber.org/papers/w27476>.

⁴⁹ Daily News, "Foster Youth Score below Peers in Standardized Tests," Daily News (Daily News, August 28, 2017), <https://www.dailynews.com/2016/09/30/foster-youth-score-below-peers-in-standardized-tests/>.

education agencies will be critical in tracking and determining the needs of the child and the interlock between the growth coordinator, tutor, and schools. An additional impediment to effectiveness is the sheer volume of variables that can potentially impact a foster child and their education performance. While school stability was identified as an issue and has become the focus of recent legislation, factors such as home placement, learning disabilities, and emotional stressors can all continue to compound and negate the policy's positive impacts. It is hard to determine the overall effect without some data from a field pilot.

Equity

The proposed policy promotes equity between socio-economic classes to ensure that the most vulnerable children in foster care are afforded the same opportunity as more affluent families. As it is currently written, there is equity across the entire foster population regarding implementing the policy. There is substantial equity between states, and the policy would leverage a general ratio of funding as used for the CARES Act funding. As it is referred to in this proposal, equity is focused on equal opportunities at the outcome rather than a fair process. This is based on the notion that the children in foster care are so disadvantaged that there is no hope of getting them to equal outcomes without unequal support at the early stages.

Despite the benefits that the equity in the original design provides, there are a couple of specific areas in which the proposal fails regarding fairness in the treatment of population groups, leading to fairness in outcomes. Concerning neglected populations, the utilization of tutors assigned to the welfare agencies allows for concerted efforts

with the foster children. However, it neglects other low-income students who are not in foster care. Currently, Title I schools and the teachers they hire could take on additional tutors and pair them with lower-performing children, foster and non-foster. While a significant number of foster children are in need of academic assistance, Title I covers a broader population than just foster children.⁵⁰ By moving an additional education specialist from the school district to the welfare agency, other low-income, low-performing, non-foster student support is decreased. Finally, as the proposal is currently written, there is not explicit equity between the costs covered by the federal government and the state/local agencies for the changes. Most of the funding for foster-care programs comes from state/local governments, with the federal government only making up a portion of the total. As shown in the Figure 7 with North Carolina as an example, over half of the funding already comes from the state.⁵¹

⁵⁰ "Title I - Improving The Academic Achievement Of The Disadvantaged," Home, December 19, 2005, <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/pg1.html>.

⁵¹ Jerard Brown, "Child Welfare Financing," Child Welfare Financing, accessed April 26, 2021, [https://www.ncsl.org/research/human-services/child-welfare-financing-101.aspx#/.](https://www.ncsl.org/research/human-services/child-welfare-financing-101.aspx#/)

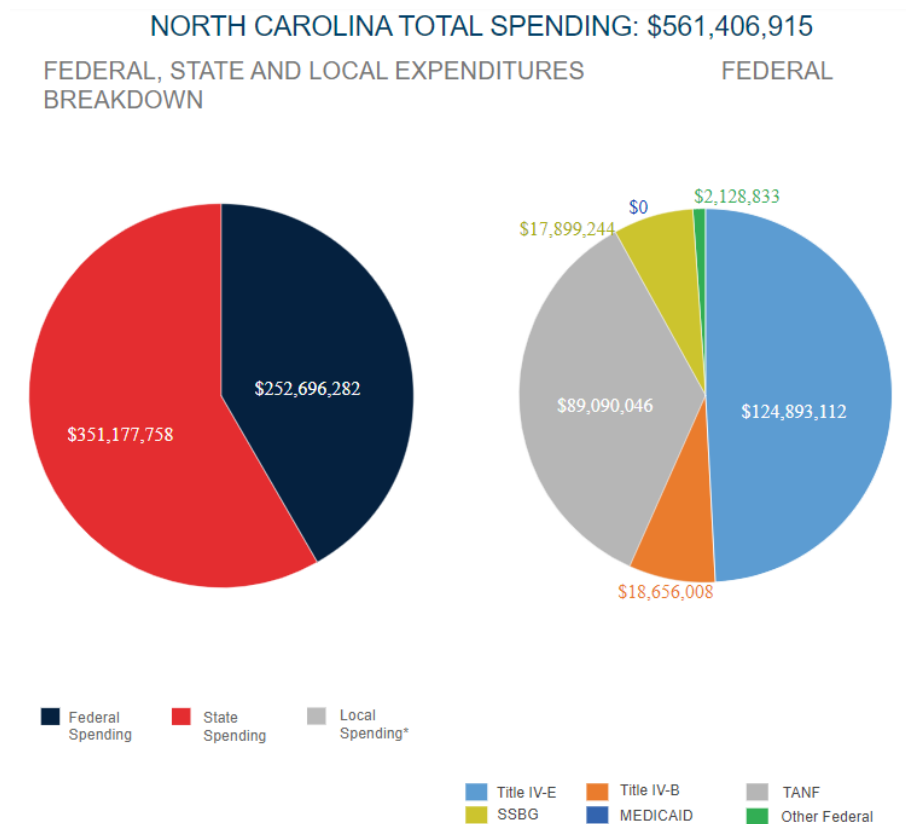


Figure 7: North Carolina Foster Care Expenditure (Federal, State, Local)

Social Acceptability

From a social awareness and activism perspective, foster care is gaining popularity, though there still exists a shortage of qualified foster parents for the number of children entering the system. Using television and movies as an indicator for public sentiment about foster care and policies that support foster children, the consensus would be a favorable social sentiment at large. Popular television series that include characters or storylines involving foster care have received positive feedback. Examples

of T.V. shows with foster themes or characters include *The Fosters*, *Mom*, and *Chicago Fire*.⁵²

While the stylized popularity of foster children in pop culture creates a compelling storyline and potentially a strong base of support for the proposal, until additional polling is conducted, it cannot be fully understood how the public will respond to the proposal. Socially there can be a negative stigma toward foster children as they age. Frequently older children in middle and high school are assumed delinquents and relegated away. The inconsistencies lead to a misunderstanding of foster children, and the portrayal on varying ends of the behavior spectrum does not help social acceptability.⁵³ There is little about this policy proposal that can directly impact foster children's perception, other than changing the outcomes generationally for the children. In the short term, a robust information campaign would need to accompany the proposal to mitigate negative perceptions around equity already mentioned above.

Administrative and Technical Feasibility

The current administrative set-up of the child welfare system has the framework required for implementing the policy proposal. Based on the proposal's current design, the addition of the education growth coordinator would be able to nest well in the child

⁵² Libby Slate, "The Power Of TV: Foster Care In Storytelling," Television Academy (Television Academy, January 1, 2017), <https://www.emmys.com/news/foundation-news/power-tv-foster-care-storytelling>.

⁵³ Meese, R.L. (2012). Modern Family: Adoption and Foster Care in Children's Literature. *The Reading Teacher*, 66(2), 129– 137. doi: 10.1002/TRTR.01112

welfare agency and become a peer to the school transportation coordinator. Regarding the issuance of technology to foster children, child welfare agencies are well-practiced in distributing materials to the wards. Initial issuance of school technology resources should not be different.

The feasibility of executing this proposal at scale has cautions and potential drawbacks that need to be considered beyond the pros of existing infrastructure and distribution practices. From a student data and privacy perspective, state and local education agencies may take issue with consistently releasing student data to the tutors who are social services employees. While this may be mitigable through dual-badging or other workarounds, the opening of networks and sharing data across agencies can be a sticky point. As referenced in the history section, it took a modification of FERPA to allow for records to be shared with anyone other than the birth parents for foster children.⁵⁴

In addition to the fore-mentioned issues with the administrative application of the proposals, there is also a potential risk to the state for tracking property if it is issued and accounted for at the welfare agency, not the school. While this will allow children to maintain access across placement and changes in school districts, the agencies may not be equipped to understand the technical requirements of maintaining the technology. The network administrators and technologists in school districts are

⁵⁴ Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, “Guidance on the Amendments to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act by the Uninterrupted Scholars Act,” *Guidance on the Amendments to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act by the Uninterrupted Scholars Act* (Washington, DC: US Department of Education, 2014).

knowledgeable about the provisioning and maintenance of education devices. This tribal knowledge may not exist with the child welfare agency I.T. staff. Finally, given the high number of children in the foster system and the difficulty of continually staffing social workers already, it may be even more difficult to create long-term solutions with tutors' staffing.⁵⁵ Staffing the tutor role through an AmeriCorps/Teach for America model can work in the short-term; however, attrition can be another potential problem. That model has received criticism for contributing to teaching turnover in low-income schools.

⁵⁵ "Social Workers Are under Huge Pressure. They Can't Rely on Their Resilience Alone," The Guardian (Guardian News and Media, March 20, 2018), <https://www.theguardian.com/social-care-network/social-life-blog/2018/mar/20/social-workers-resilience-coping-strategies-blame-austerity>.

Political Analysis

As a subagency within the Executive Branch, the Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, has an important role in the drafting and formulation of policy decisions but no constitutional authority to pass legislation. Because the policy tool for this proposal is the modification of existing, and proposal of new legislation, it is critical that a thorough political analysis of this is understood. The analysis will focus primarily on stakeholders within Congress who will play a role in the potential passage of the bills and endorsement of the proposals. In addition to legislators, key advocacy groups that will be expected to be in support of and in opposition to the proposal will be identified and analyzed. Based on the various stakeholders, the political costs and benefits will be weighed, as well as accompanying political strategies. Finally, the expected public reaction to the proposal will be outlined.

With legislation as the authorizing tool for this proposal, it will be key to have stakeholders in both the Appropriations and Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) committees in Congress, particularly the Senate. In both the House and Senate, the members of the Foster Youth Caucus will serve as prominent stakeholders in the advancement of this proposal and future legislation.⁵⁶ Within the Senate, the following members hold prominent roles on pertinent committees: Senator James Lankford, Senator Patty Murray, and Senator Chuck Grassley.

⁵⁶ Opinion Contributor Sen. Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa), "A Decade of Making a Difference: Senate Caucus on Foster Youth," TheHill (The Hill, December 23, 2019), <https://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/politics/475702-a-decade-of-making-a-difference-senate-caucus-on-foster-youth>.

As a stakeholder, Sen. Lankford is a member of both the Finance and the Appropriations Committee. He has a history of supporting legislation relating to foster care and social issues. Recently he supported efforts to change regulations relating to foster care funding and opening additional types of agencies to serve as placement agencies.⁵⁷ While not directly tied to education, it is indicative of his team's ability to work with HHS in clarifying and modifying existing regulations.

Senator Patty Murray has consistently shown to be a strong supporter of foster care and family policy issues. She is regularly vocal on increasing support for foster children and supporting the transition from care to adulthood. Sen. Murray is the Chair of the HELP Committee and sits at the intersection of both welfare and education legislation. Her inclusion as a critical stakeholder of this proposal will help address potential concerns across multiple policy issues. Sen. Murray has a history of introducing legislation to support foster youth, including the Higher Education Access and Success for Homeless and Foster Youth Act of 2015, which focuses on further closing the education gap by enabling foster children more resources to get to college.⁵⁸

Finally, Senator Chuck Grassley serves on the Committee on Finance and the President Pro Tempore Emeritus of the Senate. Sen. Grassley is a tremendous supporter

⁵⁷ "Senator Lankford Supports Efforts By the Administration to Find Loving Homes for Foster, Adoptive Children: U.S. Senator James Lankford of Oklahoma," Press Releases | News | U.S. Senator James Lankford of Oklahoma, November 1, 2019, <https://www.lankford.senate.gov/news/press-releases/senator-lankford-supports-efforts-by-the-administration-to-find-loving-homes-for-foster-adoptive-children>.

⁵⁸ Katherine Long, "Sen. Patty Murray Wants to Help More Foster and Homeless Youth Go to College," The Seattle Times (The Seattle Times Company, February 1, 2016), <https://www.seattletimes.com/education-lab/sen-patty-murray-wants-to-help-more-foster-and-homeless-youth-go-to-college/>.

of foster youths and is the co-founder and co-chair of the Senate Caucus on Foster Youth. In the 116th Congress, Sen. Grassley has already cosponsored numerous foster care related legislation, including S.2803 (Fostering Stable Housing Opportunities Act).⁵⁹ In May 2020, Sen. Grassley led an effort to designate May as National Foster Care Month to bring awareness to the struggles foster youths face, especially during COVID.⁶⁰ His prominence in the Senate and history of support makes him a key stakeholder in gaining support for the proposal.

In addition to the role that the legislators play on those committees, the other members of the caucus frequently serve as cosponsors and support legislation involving foster care, including urging the State Governors to keep foster children in mind during COVID relief.⁶¹ The support of multiple legislators will be essential in helping modifications and essential provisions of the bill remain throughout the mark-up process and ensure that the outcomes are consistent at end state.

In addition to the legislators that will have a vested interest and play a role in the passage of this proposal, there are multiple advocacy groups that are frequently involved in similar legislation. Active groups that can help to form a supportive base in

⁵⁹“Fostering Stable Housing Opportunities Act (H.R. 4300, S. 2803),” National Alliance to End Homelessness, November 16, 2020, <https://endhomelessness.org/legislation/fostering-stable-housing-opportunities-act/>.

⁶⁰ “Grassley Resolution Designating May as National Foster Care Month Passes the Senate: U.S. Senator Chuck Grassley of Iowa,” Home, May 22, 2020, <https://www.grassley.senate.gov/news/news-releases/grassley-resolution-designating-may-national-foster-care-month-passes-senate>.

⁶¹ “Rep. Bass, Foster Youth Caucus Co-Chairs, Urge State Governors to Remember Transition-Age Foster Youth In COVID-19 Pandemic,” Congresswoman Karen Bass, April 16, 2020, <https://bass.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/rep-bass-foster-youth-caucus-co-chairs-urge-state-governors-remember>.

the process are the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) and the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL). CWLA regularly advocates for legislation focused on foster child policy and has directly called out foster care funding as a legislative priority.⁶² In addition to CWLA, NCSL focuses on both social issues and education policy. The research and support of NCSL have already focused on closing the education gap and affordability of college.⁶³ The support of NCSL can go a long way as the proposal impacts not just federal policy but both education and welfare policy at the state level.

Public opinion research specifically on the foster care education gap is difficult to find and address without an explicit research team set to uncover the data. In lieu of the research, opinions on foster care reform and the state of education and reform efforts can be used as a proxy. Based on a 2006 study from ABC study 47% of Americans believe that the foster care system needs reform and “doing too little” to identify children at risk (Figure 8).⁶⁴

⁶² “ADVOCACY CENTER,” CWLA, accessed April 16, 2021, <https://www.cwla.org/our-work/advocacy/>.

⁶³ Andrew Smalley and Lesley Kennedy, “Promoting FASFA to Get More Students Into Higher Education,” Promoting FASFA to Get More Students Into Higher Education, accessed April 16, 2021, <https://www.ncsl.org/research/education/promoting-fafsa-to-get-more-students-into-higher-education.aspx>.

⁶⁴ ABC News, “Broad Support for Reform in U.S. Foster Care System,” ABC NEWS/TIME POLL: FOSTER CARE – 5/14/06, 2006, <https://abcnews.go.com/images/Politics/1011a1FosterCare.pdf>.
<https://abcnews.go.com/images/Politics/1011a1FosterCare.pdf>

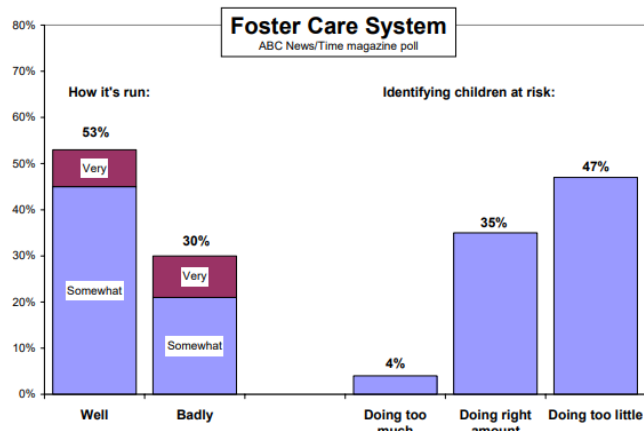


Figure 8: ABC News Foster Care Reform National Poll

Figure 8 can be interpreted as moderate support in the initiatives and reform efforts in foster care policy. Public familiarity with foster care continues to rise through the increase of themes and adjacent characters in television and movies.⁶⁵ With the increase in awareness, it is unsurprising that public sentiment toward the cause is increasing. In addition to the polling about foster care policy, the polling surrounding the education gap yielded interesting results as well. In an NPR Poll (Figure 9), it was identified very clearly that access to technology was a significant inhibitor for kids in low-income homes, and thus they would be worried about their performance – further exacerbated if a child is on an Individualized Educational Program.⁶⁶ Based on these insights, it can be inferred that parents would be supportive of additional resources provided for the most low-income students.

⁶⁵ Libby Slate, “The Power Of TV: Foster Care In Storytelling,” Television Academy (Television Academy, January 1, 2017), <https://www.emmys.com/news/foundation-news/power-tv-foster-care-storytelling>.

⁶⁶ Anya Kamenetz, “Survey Shows Big Remote Learning Gaps For Low-Income And Special Needs Children,” NPR (NPR, May 27, 2020), <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/05/27/862705225/survey-shows-big-remote-learning-gaps-for-low-income-and-special-needs-children>.

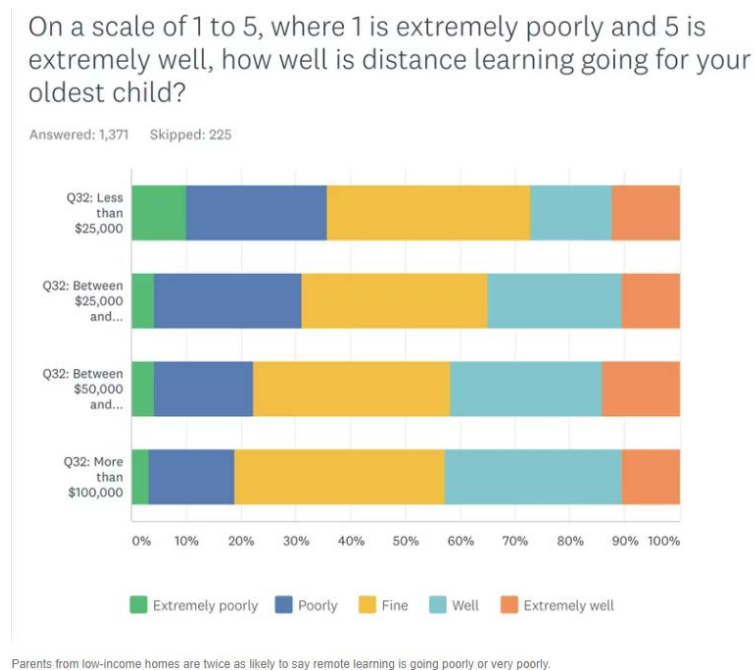


Figure 9: NPR Survey of Distance Learning & Family Income

Politically, the literal costs of the proposal could result in the relocation of funds for Title I schooling, depending on the final agreement of funding for the proposal. As currently drafted, the funding for the proposal is supplemental, but the distribution of the funding is unspecified. In the event of redistribution of funds earmarked for education, there could be political backlash.

As this proposal is in addition to solutions that are already in place, there was no potential alternative rejected in favor of this. The implementation of this proposal will be at the state level. Each state has its own myriad of political considerations, however, there are several strategies that could help alleviate stressors at implementation. The use of a strong communication and messaging plan with the roll-out can help to bolster support and adoption.

Recommendations

The education of America's most vulnerable population is a noble endeavor rooted in the foundation of making a more equal nation for all. The policy proposal addressed above provides actionable steps that can be taken to reduce the education gap that exists for foster students, bettering their outcomes in the future. The multi-faceted approach of this policy, the education coordinator, tutors assigned to the welfare agency, and the use of transportation funding for technology will have the greatest effect when they are compounded together. It is our recommendation that the proposal move forward as a whole unit; however, each part individually has value.

The greatest drawback to this proposal is the various funding streams and convoluted nature of social welfare funding. While there are difficulties with funding, the time to act and secure the future for these children is now. Given the timing, we recommend that the most expeditious means of passing this legislation would be to have it worked into the next COVID-19 bill that is passed. The purpose of COVID legislation is to build back a stronger America, and there is no better way to do that than creating a stronger foundation with literally the lowest and most disadvantaged population group.

Despite the convergence of both education and social welfare funding, the strongest con can further be mitigated by the sheer strength of the political support around creating a better future for foster children. In both the House of Representatives and the Senate, and on both sides of the aisle, many of the strongest

members of Congress are also the loudest advocates for foster youth.⁶⁷ Support for closing the education gap of foster youth is the type of legislation that can unify across parties and bind together desperate factions of the government.

In addition to the political strengths that this policy proposal has, there are numerous aspects of it that should be heavily considered when evaluating its prospects. The strongest part of the proposal is the notion of having designated tutors for foster students and having them assigned to Social Services. As shown in the NBER research, tutoring can have a tremendous outcome on student success and should be targeted specifically at the most vulnerable populations.⁶⁸ In California, New York City, and West Virginia, a pilot with an organization known as iFoster provided online tutoring support through “LEARN TO BE” to students during the pandemic and saw tremendous results. The results of the iFoster/LEARN TO BE pilot led them to expand the program to foster children throughout the country.⁶⁹ While it is fantastic that programs like that exist, they are contingent on students already being in possession of the appropriate education technology resources, and a referral from a caregiver, foster parent, or social worker. This is an example where the holistic approach of this proposal is critical to fully enabling student success.

⁶⁷ “Membership,” Membership | Congressional Caucus on Foster Youth, accessed April 26, 2021, <https://fosteryouthcaucus-karenbass.house.gov/about/membership>.

⁶⁸ Andre Nickow, Philip Oreopoulos, and Vincent Quan, “The Impressive Effects of Tutoring on PreK-12 Learning: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of the Experimental Evidence,” NBER, July 6, 2020, <https://www.nber.org/papers/w27476>.

⁶⁹ “iFoster,” iFoster, accessed April 26, 2021, <https://www.ifoster.org/introducing-the-ifoster-and-learn-to-be-partnership-for-free-online-tutoring/>.

As put forth in this memo, this policy proposal strongly shows the impact that could be made on reducing the education gap. We highly recommend that all recommendations put forth in this memo are moved forward for legislative drafting and broad dissemination.

CURRICULUM VITAE

Brian Meese is an accomplished and experienced corporate manager and military leader. He grew up in West Point, New York, the son of Brig. Gen. (Ret.) Michael Meese, Ph.D. who served as Professor and Head of the Department of Social Sciences at the U.S. Military Academy. Brian earned a commission in the U.S. Army as a Field Artillery Officer from the U.S. Military Academy and currently serves as a Public Affairs Officer in the U.S. Army Reserve. In his military service, Brian has been stationed in installations across the United States and deployed to Afghanistan and Europe. In his civilian career, Brian works as a Strategy Manager for Mergers & Acquisitions Go-to-Market Strategy with a large global technology company.

Brian holds a B.S. in Economics from the United States Military Academy at West Point. He is expected to graduate with a M.A. in Public Management from Johns Hopkins University in August 2021. He currently lives in North Carolina with his family and is a certified foster parent. His research interests include domestic social welfare and foster care policy, emerging defense and security technology, and national grand strategy.